Typhoon threatens Vietnam after killing 140 in Philippines

HANOI: Typhoon Kalmaegi made landfall on Thursday in Vietnam's already storm-battered central belt, where thousands have been evacuated from areas in the path of one of the world's deadliest cyclones this year.

Kalmaegi cut a path of destruction through the Philippines this week, killing at least 140 people and leaving 127 missing after unleashing devastating floods. It crashed into central Vietnam on Thursday, packing sustained winds of up to 149 kilometres per hour with much faster gusts, the environment ministry said.

"The wind is so so strong, nothing can resist," Vu Van Hao, said as he surveyed the shards of windows shattered by the storm in the lobby of a hotel in Gia Lai province.

"We here have never experienced such strong wind like this. It's a natural disaster, what can we do?" The typhoon hit as central Vietnam was still reeling from more than a week of flooding and record rains that killed at least 47 people and submerged centuries-old historic sites.

"This is a huge typhoon with terrible devastating capacity," said Pham Anh Tuan, a top provincial official in Gia Lai, where state media said over 7,000 people had been evacuated as of Wednesday night.

In Gia Lai's coastal area of Quy Nhon Nam, a reporter saw officials knocking doors warning people to flee before the typhoon hit. Elderly women and children were among dozens of people sheltering on Thursday at a school, carrying mats, pillows and blankets.

"I am not young anymore and I don't want to risk my life," said Tran Thi Nghia, 56, who left her one-storey home at the urging of authorities. Vietnam is in one of the most active tropical cyclone regions on Earth and is typically affected by 10 typhoons or storms a year, but Kalmaegi is set to be the 13th of 2025.—AFP

WAVES crash onto Vietnam's Quy Nhon beach ahead of the arrival of Typhoon Kalmaegi.—AFP

Shooting at start of B'desh poll campaign kills one

DHAKA: Gunmen on motorbikes attacked a Bangladesh political rally, killing one person and wounding two others, including a candidate, officials said on Thursday, after parties began campaigning for landmark elections.

Major parties opened their campaigns on Wednesday for the elections slated for February 2026, the first since a deadly uprising last year toppled the autocratic government of former ruler Sheikh Hasina. Campaigning turned violent almost immediately.

The shooting took place at a rally on Wednesday for the powerful Bangladesh National Party (BNP) attended by hundreds in the port city of Chattogram, police said.

Senior BNP leader Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury said "it was an attempt to destabilise politics and disrupt the election". The BNP are widely seen as the frontrunner in the polls.

Police said the gunmen opened fire quickly on a crowd of hundreds at the rally but insisted that the BNP candidate was not the target.—AFP

Opium cultivation down 20pc in Afghanistan, UN says

Report warns of sharp rise in synthetic drug activity, particularly methamphetamine

KABUL: Opium cultivation in Afghanistan dropped by 20 per cent in 2025, the United Nations said on Thursday, while warning of a simultaneous surge in synthetic drug production and trafficking.

The Taliban authorities banned opium poppy cultivation nationwide in 2022, the year after they returned to power in Kabul.

The area dedicated to poppy farming fell from 12,800 hectares (around 31,600 acres) in 2024 to 10,200 hectares in 2025, a new report released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said.

Opium cultivation in 2022 covered around 232,000 hectares, according to the UNODC. Output of opium, the core ingredient in heroin, was estimated at 296 tons in 2025, a 32pc drop compared to the previous year.

Farmers' income from opium sales fell by nearly half, from $260 million in 2024 to $134 million this year. Prices of dry opium remain five times higher than the pre-ban average despite a decline in 2025, the UNODC said.

The agency also warned of a sharp rise in synthetic drug activity, particularly methamphetamine.

"Synthetic drugs appear to have become the new business model for organised crime groups due to the relative ease of production, the greater difficulty in detection and relative resilience to climate changes," it said. "After the ban, many farmers shifted to growing cereals and other crops.

Worsening weather conditions, such as droughts or low rainfall, however, resulted in over 40pc of farmland laying barren," the agency said. The 20pc reduction in the area under cultivation follows a 19pc rebound in 2024. Those fluctuations are a mere fraction of the massive drop in 2023 that followed the Taliban's announcement in 2022 that it was outlawing narcotics production.

At the same time, despite the smaller harvest, the price for dry opium fell 27pc to $570 per kilogram, it added.

That "suggests a shift in market dynamics and might trigger an increase in attempts to cultivate illicit opium in other countries," it said, adding: "Cultivation data, together with prices and seizures, signal fundamental changes in drug markets and trafficking in and around Afghanistan." The production of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine, has continued to increase since the ban, the UNODC said.

"As agricultural-based opiate production declines, synthetic drugs appear to have become the new business model for organised crime groups due to the relative ease of production, the greater difficulty in detection and relative resilience to climate changes," it added.

The UN has repeatedly called on the international community to help Afghan farmers transition away from opium to other crops and livelihoods, a request also made by the Taliban government.

The 2022 ban caused a shift in cultivation areas to Afghanistan's northeast, away from Taliban strongholds in the south where it was previously cultivated. Several people were killed in clashes in May 2024 between farmers and law enforcement forces sent to destroy poppy fields in the northeastern region of Badakhshan, which has resisted the opium ban.—Agencies

Mexican president files complaint after assault

MEXICO CITY: Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said on Wednesday she had filed a complaint against a man who harassed her and tried to kiss her as she walked between meetings in the capital, a day after a video of the incident went viral.

"If this happens to the president, where does that leave all the young women in our country," said Sheinbaum, Mexico's first woman president. "No man has the right to abuse women's personal space."

Video of the incident quickly ricocheted across the internet before being taken down by some accounts, underscoring for many in Mexico the insecurity women face in a country steeped in machismo and gender-based violence.

It has also raised questions about Sheinbaum's security detail. Like her predecessor, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, Sheinbaum travels with minimal security and makes herself widely available to the public, including wading into crowds of people.

She said on Wednesday that she did not plan to change that practice, saying "we have to be close to the people". The incident happened on Tuesday in the capital's historic centre as Sheinbaum was greeting the public while making the short walk from Mexico's national palace to the ministry of education.

The video shows a middle-aged man putting his arm around Sheinbaum, touching her chest and attempting to kiss her. She moves his hands away before a member of her staff steps between them.

The president's security detail did not appear to be near her at the moment.

Sheinbaum said the man appeared to be drunk.

Blasts newspaper for 're-victimisation'

She also blasted Mexican newspaper *Reforma* for publishing images of the man attacking her, saying she considered it a "re-victimisation" and that it crossed an ethical line.

"The use of the image is also a crime," Sheinbaum said, pointing to legislation against digital violence. "I am waiting for an apology from the newspaper."

The women's ministry, created under Sheinbaum, issued a statement on Tuesday encouraging women to report violence against them, but asking media outlets "not to reproduce content that violates the integrity of women". Still, feminist activists have sharply criticised Sheinbaum in the past for not doing enough to address violence against women.—Reuters

Scientists unveil first draft of developing brain's atlas

WASHINGTON: Scientists have reached a milestone in an ambitious initiative to chart how the many types of brain cells emerge and mature from the earliest embryonic and fetal stages until adulthood, knowledge that could point to new ways of tackling certain brain-related conditions like autism and schizophrenia.

The researchers said they have completed a first draft of atlases of the developing human brain and the developing mammalian brain. The research focused on human and mouse brain cells, with some work in monkey brain cells too. In their initial draft, the scientists mapped the development of different types of brain cells — tracking how they are born, differentiate and mature into various types with unique functions. They also tracked how genes are turned on or off in these cells over time.

Research collaboration

The scientists identified key genes controlling brain processes and uncovered some commonalities of brain cell development between human and animal brains, as well as some unique aspects of the human brain, including identifying previously unknown cell types. The findings were detailed in a collection of studies published in *Nature* and related journals.

The research is part of the US National Institutes of Health's BRAIN Initiative Cell Atlas Network, or BICAN, an international scientific collaboration to create a comprehensive atlas of the human brain.

"Our brain has thousands of types of cells with extraordinary diversity in their cellular properties and functions, and these diverse cell types work together to generate a variety of behaviours, emotions and cognition," said neuroscientist Hongkui Zeng, director of brain science at the Allen Institute in Seattle and leader of two of the studies.

Researchers have found more than 5,000 cell types in the mouse brain. It is thought there are at least that many in the human brain. "The developing brain is an incredibly enigmatic structure because it is hard to access, comprised of so many distinct cell types, and rapidly changing. While we knew the big-picture shifts that happen during brain development, we now have a much more detailed understanding of what the pieces of the developing brain are because of this set of atlases," said UCLA neuroscientist Aparna Bhaduri, another of the research leaders.

The research promises important practical applications. "First, by studying and comparing brain development in human and animals, we will better understand human specialisation and where our unique intelligence comes from. Second, by understanding normal brain development in humans and animals, we will be better able to study what changes are happening in diseased brains — when and where — both in human diseased tissues and in animal disease models," Zeng said.

Brain disease understanding

By gaining this knowledge, scientists hope to achieve more precise gene- and cell-based therapies for a range of human diseases, Zeng said. The hope is that the findings will provide a deeper understanding of autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia and other conditions known to unfold during brain development.

The brain regions for which the researchers created atlases for cell type development included the neocortex, which is the part of the brain's outermost layer where higher cognitive function originates, and the hypothalamus, a small structure deep in the brain that helps govern body temperature, blood pressure, mood, sleep, sex drive, hunger and thirst.

One study showed that a subset of cells in human brain tumors are similar to embryonic progenitor cells — a kind of cell in the embryo that can change into specific types within a particular brain region — raising the possibility that such tumors may hijack developmental processes to drive malignancy.

The researchers identified some unique aspects of the human brain. One example was the prolonged process of differentiation in cortical cell types due to the long period of human brain development from fetus to adolescence compared to the speedier development timeline in the animals.

Among the newly identified brain cell types were some in the neocortex and the striatum region, which controls movement and certain other functions.

"The goal is to ultimately understand not only what the pieces of the developing brain are, but also to describe what happens in neurodevelopmental and neuropsychiatric disorders that develop vulnerability during development," Bhaduri said.

"This is also relevant to brain cancer, which my lab also studies, as during brain cancer these developmental pieces re-emerge. So it is really a big goal, and it will take time to fully understand and treat all these disorders. But this set of papers is a nice piece of progress," Bhaduri said.—Reuters

NEWSMAKERS

ROME: Robert De Niro poses with Rome's mayor Roberto Gualtieri at Capitoline Hill after the Hollywood actor was awarded the city's top honour Lupa Capitolina.—Reuters

NEW DELHI: A protester, with his face covered with a scarf, holds a placard during a demonstration demanding immediate government action to address air pollution.—Reuters

AMSTERDAM: French artist James Colomina displays his works around this city's canals to highlight his concerns about the Netherlands climate policy.—Reuters

GRECIA Quiroz takes oath as mayor of Uruapan, Mexico's avocado capital.—Reuters

Wife of assassinated Mexican mayor assumes his office

MEXICO CITY: The wife of a mayor brazenly assassinated during Day of the Dead celebrations in the violence-ridden Mexican state of Michoacan assumed her husband's job on Wednesday, vowing to carry on her husband's crusade against organized crime.

Grecia Quiroz was sworn in to replace her husband, Carlos Manzo, as mayor of Uruapan, known as Mexico's avocado capital, after the state's congress gave the move unanimous approval.

"Today I come with a broken heart because they took my life partner, the father of my children, but also with this courage, this fortitude with which he rose to fight," Quiroz said during her swearing-in.

"They are not going to silence me ... I am going to follow in his footsteps," she added, holding her deceased husband's hat as a symbol of their movement.

A hooded gunman shot and killed Manzo, 40, on Saturday night as he attended a candlelight festival in an attack that sparked national outrage, in part because of his outspoken criticism of the federal government for not doing more to fight organized crime.

Moments before the shooting, Manzo had given a speech in the city of 350,000 and carried around his young son in his arms, dressed as a skeleton. Manzo had expressed fears for his safety while still speaking out against the powerful drug cartels that have become entrenched in the lucrative avocado and lime business.

Carlos Bautista, leader of the Independent Hat Movement, to which Manzo belonged, told Reuters the new mayor will be protected by at least 14 security agents.—Reuters

LEISHAN: Women of Miao ethnic group pose for a photograph during a spring festival in south-western China's Guizhou province.—AFP

LONDON: A man walks past a poster that reads 'Give Zionism the red card', posted on a tree across from Villa Park in Birmingham ahead of a Europa League football match featuring Maccabi Tel Aviv, an Israeli club.—AFP